

## **METHODS AND APPARATUS FOR SYNCHRONIZING DEVICES ON DIFFERENT DATA BUSES**

### **Technical Field**

5   **[0001]**       The invention relates to synchronizing the operations of two or more devices which are connected to different data buses. The invention has particular application to digital imaging. The invention may be applied to synchronizing two or more digital cameras which are located on different data buses.

10

### **Background**

**[0002]**       There are many applications for digital cameras which are interfaced to computers. A digital camera typically operates by acquiring a series of images from a suitable imaging array. In some applications it is desirable to operate two or more digital cameras in a synchronized manner so that the video cameras acquire images substantially simultaneously. For example, when using two cameras to acquire stereo images of moving objects, the positions of the objects can be more accurately ascertained if both cameras acquire images at the same time.

20

**[0003]**       The resolution of video cameras is improving. With other factors equal, higher resolution cameras produce more data than do lower resolution video cameras. The sheer volume of data produced by multiple high resolution video cameras is beyond the capacity of many current high-speed data buses of types which it is convenient to use in interconnecting video cameras and data processing devices. This forces designers of systems which require multiple video cameras to either distribute the video cameras across multiple buses or live with one or

25

more of: lower resolution images, lower frame rates, or expensive proprietary interfaces.

5       **[0004]**       One could interconnect the cameras directly on a separate wiring system which carries a synchronization signal but this is inconvenient, and it also makes it difficult to achieve proper overlap of acquisition and transmission of frames because the time at which integration will occur is not known. Further, especially in factories or other electrically noisy environments such systems can be susceptible to  
10       picking up electrical noise.

15       **[0005]**       Where digital cameras are distributed across multiple buses there is the difficulty that for certain applications it is necessary to maintain the cameras operating synchronously with one another. In various applications other types of time-sensitive devices such as sound recorders, video displays, and other data acquisition or output devices need to be operated in synchrony with one another.

20       **[0006]**       There is a need for ways to synchronize cameras and other time-sensitive devices which are on different buses.

#### Summary of the Invention

25       **[0007]**       This invention synchronizes the operation of time sensitive devices such as video cameras, video displays, audio recording devices, audio playback devices, or other data acquisition or output devices operating on separate buses. One aspect of the invention provides a method which determines differences between timing signals on a first

bus chosen to be used as a “master” bus and one or more second buses which can be considered to be “slave” buses. The method then generates and sends to devices on each of the one or more slave buses timing signals which indicate offsets and/or relative drifts between the timing of the master and slave buses. The devices on the slave buses can use the timing signals to adjust their operation so that time sensitive events occur as if all of the devices were connected to the master bus. Another aspect of the invention provides a method wherein a separate clock, which could be a clock of a separate bus without any of the devices thereon, is designated as the master clock, with all of the devices connected to slave buses.

**[0008]** Another aspect of the invention provides a system which includes a plurality of buses each connecting one or more devices to a data processor and a mechanism for synchronizing the operation of the devices.

**[0009]** Further aspects of the invention and features of specific embodiments of the invention are described below.

20

#### Brief Description of the Drawings

**[0010]** In drawings which illustrate non-limiting embodiments of the invention,  
25 Figure 1 is a block diagram illustrating apparatus according to one embodiment of the invention;

Figure 2 is a block diagram illustrating apparatus according to another embodiment of the invention;

Figure 3 is a block diagram illustrating a synchronization unit as may be used in the apparatus of Figure 2;

5        Figure 4 is a block diagram illustrating an apparatus according to another embodiment of the invention;

Figure 5 is a block diagram of a device which uses offset and drift information according to the invention to keep in synchronization with other devices;

10       Figure 6 is a flow chart which illustrates a method for determining a timing offset between two buses and generating a timing signal;

Figure 7 is a flow chart illustrating a method which may be performed in a device attached to a bus for synchronizing operation of the device with operation of other devices using a timing signal; and,

15       Figure 8 is a block diagram illustrating a plurality of cameras connected for synchronization according to another embodiment of the invention.

#### Description

20    **[0011]**       Throughout the following description, specific details are set forth in order to provide a more thorough understanding of the invention. However, the invention may be practiced without these particulars. In other instances, well known elements have not been shown or described in detail to avoid unnecessarily obscuring the  
25    invention. Accordingly, the specification and drawings are to be regarded in an illustrative, rather than a restrictive, sense.

[0012] Figure 1 shows apparatus **10** according to one embodiment of the invention. Apparatus **10** comprises four devices **14A**, **14B**, **14C**, and **14D** (collectively devices **14**). Devices **14** may, for example, comprise video cameras, video displays, audio recording devices, audio playback devices, or other data acquisition or output devices. Devices **14** each generate data (video data in the case that devices **14** are digital video cameras) which is carried to a data processor **16** on a corresponding bus **18A**, **18B**, **18C** or **18D** (collectively buses **18**). Data processor **16** may comprise a single element, or may comprise data processors **16A** and **16B**, as illustrated in Figure 1. Buses **18** may comprise any suitable bus technology. For example, buses **18** may operate according to the IEEE 1394 standard (also known as FIREWIRE™ or iLink™). Alternatively, each of buses **18** may comprise a different type of bus operating according to a different standard. Buses **18** provide timing signals for use by devices **14** connected to buses **18**. In some embodiments buses **18** are each of a type which automatically broadcasts timing signals to devices **14**.

[0013] Buses **18A**, **18B**, and **18C** each connect to data processor **16A** by way of a corresponding one of hardware / software interfaces **20A**, **20B** and **20C**. Bus **18D** is connected to data processor **16B** by way of an interface **20D**. Interfaces **20A** through **20D** are referred collectively herein as interfaces **20**. Each interface **20** may comprise a clock for generating bus timing information for the corresponding bus **18**. Data processor **16A** can receive data from or transmit data to device **14D** by way of a network connection **19** which directly or indirectly connects

data processor **16A** to data processor **16B**. In a typical implementation of the invention, each of data processors **16A** and **16B** comprises a personal computer.

5   **[0014]**       Data processor **16** comprises at least one processing element **22** which has access to a program memory **24**. Memory **24** contains software instructions **26** which, when executed, cause processing element **22** to generate synchronization timing information used to synchronize devices **14** on different buses **18** in a method according to one  
10   embodiment of the invention.

**[0015]**       One of buses **18**, in this instance bus **18A**, is designated as a master bus. The choice of which bus **18** to designate as a master is arbitrary. Software instructions **26** causes processing element **22** to  
15   determine a time offset between the timing of master bus **18A** and the timing of each of “slave” buses **18B** and **18C**. This may be done, for example, by retrieving timing information from the interface **20** corresponding to each bus **18**. Devices on bus **18D**, which is connected to a different computer, can also be synchronized. Software **26** can cause  
20   data processor **16A** to retrieve timing information for bus **18D** by way of network connection **19**. Software running on data processor **16B** may be provided to retrieve timing information for bus **18D** by means of interface **20D** upon a request received from data processor **16A** and to send the timing information to data processor **16A** by way of network  
25   connection **19**.

**[0016]** To obtain accurate measurements of the timing offset between first and second buses, it is desirable to average over a number of measurements. For example, software **26** could cause processing element **22** to read timing information for a first one of the buses **18**, read  
5 timing information for the second one of buses **18**, read the timing information again for the first one of buses **18** and then subtract the timing information for the second one of buses **18** from an average of the two readings of timing information for the first one of buses **18**, to obtain an offset between the timing of the first and second buses.

10

**[0017]** For each one of the buses **18** which is considered a “slave,” software **26** can cause the time offset information for that bus to be sent periodically to any devices **14** on that bus. Timing control systems in each of devices **14** can use the offset information to adjust their timing to  
15 be synchronized with any devices **14** on master bus **18A**. Some ways in which timing control systems can operate in specific devices are described below.

**[0018]** In general, the time offset between two buses **18** which have  
20 independent clocks will not stay constant but will drift. This can be corrected for by computing the difference between subsequent measurements of the time offset and computing the rate of drift from the difference and the time between the measurements. In some embodiments of the invention software **26** causes both the time offset for  
25 each slave bus and a rate of drift in the time offset for the slave bus to be transmitted to each device **14** on that slave bus.

- [0019]** The rate of drift described above is a reasonably close approximation to the first derivative of the time offset with time. Where three or more measurements of the time offset are available for a slave bus **18**, software **26** may compute a better approximation of the first derivative of the time offset with respect to time and/or, may compute approximations to higher derivatives of the time offset with respect to time. Software **26** may cause such first and higher derivatives to be transmitted to devices **14** on the corresponding slave bus **18**.
- [0020]** Figure 2 illustrates apparatus **30** according to another embodiment of the invention. Components of apparatus **30** which are common with apparatus **10** are given the same reference numerals. Apparatus **30** differs from apparatus **10** in the provision of synchronization units **32A**, **32B** and **32C** (collectively synchronization units **32**) and in the fact that software **26** is not required. In the embodiment of Figures 2 and 4, network connection **19** is not required for synchronization of devices **14** although it may be required for the purpose of delivering to data processor **16A** data from a device **14** on a bus **18** which is connected to data processor **16B**.
- [0021]** As shown in Figure 3, each synchronization unit **32** comprises at least two interfaces **20** which each connect to an embedded processing element **34**. Processing element **34** executes firmware instructions stored in program memory **36**. One interface **20M** of synchronization unit **32** connects to bus **18** to be used as a timing master. The other interface(s) **20S** connect to buses **18** that are to be used as timing slaves. Synchronization unit **32** determines the time offset and



offset drift between the bus connected to each slave interface **20S** and the bus **18** connected to its master interface **20M**. Synchronization unit **32** forwards this information to any devices **14** connected to the bus **18** to which the slave interface **20S** is connected.

5

[0022] Figure 4 shows apparatus **30A** which uses synchronization units **32** in another configuration. In apparatus **30A** all of buses **18** are synchronized with the bus **21** which is shared between the master interfaces **20M** of synchronization units **32**. In the embodiment of Figure  
10 4 no data from any of devices **14** is transmitted on bus **21**.

[0023] Figure 6 illustrates steps in a method **100** for obtaining offset information and drift information and providing that information to devices **14** on one of the slave buses **18** according to the invention. It  
15 is to be understood that method **100** could be carried out simultaneously for any number of slave buses **18**. After starting at block **102**, method **100** proceeds to block **104**, where timing information for master bus **18A** is acquired. Next, the timing information for slave bus **18** is acquired at block **106**, and then the timing information for master bus **18A** is  
20 acquired again at block **108**. At block **110** the average of the two values of timing information acquired from master bus **18A** is calculated, and this average is compared to the value of the timing information for slave bus **18** at block **112** to determine a timing offset for slave bus **18**.  
Averaging of the timing information for master bus **18A** ensures that the  
25 timing offset for slave bus **18** will be accurate, since one value for master bus **18A** is acquired before the value for slave bus **18** and the other value

for master bus **18A** is acquired after, thus compensating for any delays in getting the timing information from master bus **18A** and slave bus **18**. Once calculated, the timing offset for slave bus **18** is saved in program memory **24** at block **114**.

5

[0024] At block **116**, method **100** determines if it is on a first iteration of the loop (i.e., whether or not the timing offset has been calculated before). If method **100** is on its first iteration (i.e., no previous timing offset has been determined, block **116** yes output), method **100** proceeds to block **118** where the drift rate is set to 0. If method **100** is not on its first iteration (i.e., at least one previous timing offset has been determined, block **116** no output), method **100** proceeds to block **120** where the drift rate is determined based on the difference between the two most recently determined timing offsets and the time elapsed between their respective determinations.

[0025] Once the drift rate has been determined at block **120** (or set to 0 at block **118**), method **100** proceeds to block **122**, where the most recently determined timing offset and drift rate are broadcast to devices **14** on slave bus **18**. Method **100** then waits for an amount of time at block **124**. The amount of time spent waiting at block **124** may be predetermined based on the synchronization accuracy required for the particular application. The greater degree of accuracy required, the shorter the wait time at block **124**. Alternatively, the amount of time spent waiting at block **124** may be determined based on the drift rate, with smaller drift rates leading to longer wait times, since the smaller the drift rate, the less frequently the synchronization timing information

needs to be updated. After waiting at block **124**, method **100** returns to block **104** and repeats. In some embodiments method **100** is configured to repeat approximately once per second.

- 5    **[0026]**        The broadcast of offset information or offset information and drift rate information to each device **14** on a slave bus **18** permits those devices **14** to synchronize themselves with devices **14** on master bus **18A** (or master bus **21** in the case of Figure 4).
- 10   **[0027]**        Figure 5 is a block diagram of a device **14** which may be used in the invention. Device **14** comprises an interface **50** to a slave bus **18**. A processing element **52** has access to storage locations **54** and **56**. Processing element **52** receives timing offset information for slave bus **18** and timing drift rate information for slave bus **18** and saves these
- 15   items of information in storage locations **54** and **56** respectively. Processing element **52** applies a rule to determine when certain events should occur relative to the timing of master bus **18**. For example, a certain device **14** may operate according to a rule that requires it to commence a data acquisition cycle each time a clock associated with a
- 20   master bus has a value which is an integer multiple of a certain number. To give a more specific example, suppose the master bus **18** has a clock frequency of 50 MHz and the device **14** is a digital video camera which operates at 50 frames per second. Such a device **14** may operate according to a rule which says that it should start a cycle for acquiring a
- 25   frame each time the value of the bus clock is evenly divisible by 1,000,000. Of course, on buses **18** which transmit binary data, the devices **14** may operate according to a rule which says the cycles should

start when the value of the bus clock is divisible a number expressed in binary form. Where several devices **14** all operate according to the same timing rule (or compatible rules) then their operation will remain synchronized.

5

**[0028]** Processing element **52** can determine whether an event is occurring at the correct time by using the current time on its slave bus **18** together with offset and drift rate information for the slave bus **18** relative to the master bus **18** to determine when the event is occurring  
10 relative to the time on the master bus **18**.

**[0029]** When processing element **52** determines that one or more events in the operation of device **14** are occurring at times other than the desired times (in which case device **14** would not be operating  
15 synchronously with other devices **14** in which the events occur at the desired times) then processing element **52** controls an adjustable delay **58**. Delay **58** alters a length of one or more operational cycles of device **14** or temporarily suspends operation of device **14** and thereby causes the events to occur at the desired times in future operational cycles.

20

**[0030]** Figure 7 illustrates steps in a method **200** which may be implemented in a case where devices **14** comprise video cameras. Digital video cameras typically operate by sequentially acquiring images taken by an array of light detectors. The light detectors may be, for  
25 example, CCDs (charge coupled devices). Each image is acquired at the start of a frame. Data from the light detector array is then read out,

typically row-by-row. The frame ends when the last data of the image has been read from the array. After one frame ends a new frame can start.

[0031] Method **200** may be carried out by a timing control system  
5 in each device **14** which is not on a bus selected as the “master” bus.  
After method **200** begins at block **202**, device **14** receives timing offset  
and drift rate information from a synchronization unit **32** or data  
processor **16** at block **204**. This information is maintained in a memory  
available to device **14**. Each device **14** includes a processor which is  
10 configured (in software and/or hardware) to retrieve timing signals from  
the bus **18** to which the device is connected at block **206**, and to compute  
a global time at block **208**. The global time may be calculated based upon  
a local time, the time offset information and the drift rate information.  
The local time is a time indicated by the timing signals on the slave bus  
15 **18** to which the device is connected. For any devices **14** on the master  
bus **18** the global time is the same as the local time.

[0032] Once the global time is computed at block **208**, device **14**  
applies the applicable rule to the global time to determine the next  
20 regularly scheduled frame start time at block **210**. Where devices **14**  
include a number of cameras then it is generally desired to synchronize  
the cameras so that they all commence a new frame at the same global  
time. Since each frame should take the same amount of time (the frame  
time) to complete, the desired start time for frames can be expressed in  
25 the global time as a starting time,  $t_0$ , plus a discrete multiple of the ideal  
frame time. At block **212**, device **14** determines the difference (if any)  
between its next regularly scheduled frame start time and the next desired

frame start time. If block 214 determines that there is a difference in the start times, device 14 adjusts its frame length so that the next frame starts at the next desired frame start time.

- 5    **[0033]**       One way to maintain a camera in synchronization with other cameras is to make adjustments to the time the camera takes to complete a current frame (the “frame length”) to cause new frames start at the desired start times. A convenient way to vary a frame length in a camera is to vary an amount of data read out from a light-sensing array in the
- 10   camera. The array of light-sensing elements in a video camera is typically somewhat larger than the size of the images to be produced. For example, a 660×494 CCD array might be used in a camera which is intended to produce an image having dimensions of 640 pixels by 480 pixels.
- 15   **[0034]**       It is convenient to create a situation which permits a simple adjustment to the frame length by reading a selected amount of non-critical data from a light-sensing array. Since some time is taken to read each piece of data, a current frame can be extended by reading more unnecessary data, thereby delaying the time at which a next frame
- 20   commences. Conversely, a current frame can be made to finish earlier by reducing an amount of unnecessary data which is read, thereby permitting the next frame to begin sooner. For example, a camera may be configured so that one or more non-critical lines are read at some point during each frame. These lines, which are called extra lines herein,
- 25   may be lines which are outside of the image area. The extra lines may, for example, be read at the start of each frame. Timing adjustments may also, or in the alternative, be performed on a line-by-line basis by reading

one or more non-essential pixels in one or more lines of the array which do contain data from the image area. Data which is read from the array which is not required as part of the image is called extra data herein.

- 5     **[0035]**       One way to adjust the timing of a video camera is to vary the amount of time taken to read extra data from the array. The time taken to read data for an image from the array can be increased by reading more extra data. The amount of the increase depends upon how much extra data is read during the frame. Based on the difference between the global  
10   time at which a frame actually started (as determined from the local time, offset information and drift rate information) and the desired global time for the start of the frame, (or for some event which occurs during a frame such as commencing reading a line of data from a light sensing array), the processor in the device can shorten or lengthen the time spent in  
15   reading extra data appropriately to cause the start of the next frame (or the intermediate event) to occur at the desired time (or at least closer to the desired time). In some embodiments, reading extra data could comprise an additional, redundant, reading of image data.
- 20   **[0036]**       Device **14** may determine the difference between the actual time at which a frame starts and the desired time at which the frame should have started. This difference may be determined for every frame but could also be determined periodically or, less preferably, sporadically. If this difference indicates that the frame started too soon  
25   then the start of the next frame can be delayed by an appropriate amount, for example, by reading more extra data. This may include reading extra data from one or more of the extra lines, reading extra data from one or

more lines which also contain image data, or both. If the difference indicates that the frame started too late then the start of the next frame can be moved up by a suitable amount, for example by reading off less data from one or more of the extra lines. Since data is typically clocked  
5 off from a row of an array of light detectors (such as a CCD array) as if the row were a shift register, the number of pixels to be clocked off can be specified. This number sets the amount of time that reading data from the line will take.

10 [0037] Where drift rate information is provided the device **14** can stay in close synchronization with other devices **14** even if the offset information and drift rate information are updated relatively infrequently.

[0038] Figure 8 illustrates apparatus **80** according to another  
15 embodiment of the invention. Components of apparatus **80** which are common with apparatus **10** and **30** are given the same reference numerals. Apparatus **80** comprises devices **14A-P**, each of which preferably comprises a camera. The cameras are all positioned to record images of image area **82**. Devices **14A-H** are coupled to data processor  
20 **16A** by buses **18A-H**, respectively, and devices **14I-P** are coupled to data processor **16B** by buses **18I-P**, respectively. Interfaces **20** are not shown in Figure 8. Data processors **16A** and **16B** are interconnected by network connection **19**. The embodiment of Figure 8 allows all of the cameras to record frames in a synchronized fashion, which is desirable for certain  
25 special effects applications.



**[0039]** Certain implementations of the invention comprise computer processors which execute software instructions which cause the processors to perform a method of the invention. For example, one or more processors in a data processor **16** or synchronization unit **32** may  
5 implement the methods of Figure 6 by executing software instructions in a program memory accessible to the processor(s). The invention may also be provided in the form of a program product. The program product may comprise any medium which carries a set of computer-readable signals comprising instructions which, when executed by a computer processor,  
10 cause the data processor to execute a method of the invention. Program products according to the invention may be in any of a wide variety of forms. The program product may comprise, for example, physical media such as magnetic data storage media including floppy diskettes, hard disk drives, optical data storage media including CD ROMs, DVDs, electronic  
15 data storage media including ROMs, flash RAM, or the like or transmission-type media such as digital or analog communication links.

**[0040]** Where a component (e.g. a software module, processor, assembly, device, circuit, etc.) is referred to above, unless otherwise  
20 indicated, reference to that component (including a reference to a "means") should be interpreted as including as equivalents of that component any component which performs the function of the described component (i.e., that is functionally equivalent), including components which are not structurally equivalent to the disclosed structure which  
25 performs the function in the illustrated exemplary embodiments of the invention.

**[0041]** As will be apparent to those skilled in the art in the light of the foregoing disclosure, many alterations and modifications are possible in the practice of this invention without departing from the spirit or scope thereof. For example:

- 5     •     Methods according to the invention may be implemented using hardware logic circuits instead of, or in addition to, data processors which execute software instructions. For example, a synchronization unit **32** may comprise an ASIC (application specific integrated circuit) or FPGA (field programmable gate  
10     array) which incorporates logic circuits which implements a method according to the invention. The term “processor” herein includes such hardware logic circuits.
- As an alternative to reading extra lines from an array of CCDs or other light-sensitive devices, a software controlled delay may be  
15     introduced to adjust the frame time or a time between frames to achieve synchronization. The software controlled delay may be generated by a hardware timer or by a timer implemented in software in the device. The software-controlled delay may  
20     comprise varying a speed of a clock or waiting out a number of clock cycles.
- While Figure 6 illustrates a method which involves reading a slave bus time between two readings of a master bus time, other  
25     sequences of time readings could be made to obtain an offset between the master bus time and the slave bus time. For example, the master bus time could be read between two readings of the slave bus time.

- Using one bus as a master for timing reference purposes is merely a matter of convenience. In practice devices on a plurality of buses could all be synchronized relative to another clock which serves as a master clock. Alternatively, all of the devices could be  
5       synchronized relative to an average of the clocks of the individual buses.

Accordingly, the scope of the invention is to be construed in accordance with the substance defined by the following claims.